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Down in the barrooms, in lecture halls, at publishing houses—anywhere New Orleans' phenomena such as Mardi Gras, jazz, and Creole ladies with flashing smiles are sometimes discussed, the snowball is frequently overlooked. But while several cities lay at least partial claim to the origin of jazz and while New Orleans isn't alone in celebrating carnival, nor in amusing Creole ladies, there is absolutely no doubt that the snowball is a delicacy that, in its true form, is not offered anywhere else known to man outside of greater New Orleans.

Note please that the subject is *snowballs* (frequently spelled "snoballs") and not *snow cones*. The latter are those miserable cone-shaped chunks of chopped ice sprinkled with either spearmint, strawberry, or grape syrup and generally peddled to the naive at fairs and circuses. Snow cones are the closest that the rest of the world has come to replicating the snowball. Even at that, they are similar to a snowball in quality and style as beer is to champagne—that's bad beer and good champagne.

A snowball, when it is prepared correctly, is a perfect blend of not only syrup and ice but art and science as well. Rich syrups, the color of any one of infinite possibilities of home concocted flavors, flood the snowy surface and then, through capillary action, spread downward bringing color and taste to the icy fluff.

Sociologically, the snowball symbolizes the *bon vivant* fervor of its hometown. The food has no nutritional value and it is sprinkled with sugar-coated calories. Yet, it is celebrated because it is colorful, tastes good, and on humid summer days, even feels good.

What distinguishes a snowball from unreasonable facsimiles is, most of all, the snow. Machines that pulverized ice into chunky bits had been around for a long time, but it was the creation of the "Sno-Wizard," a locally produced machine which changed ice blocks into a snowy spray, that started the business of snowballing.

George Ortolano, a grocer, who during the Depression days was looking for extra business by selling snowballs, built the first Sno-Wizard machine in 1937. Because of this invention, Ortolano could rightfully be called the "father of the snowball," or at least its guardian, and the corner of Magazine and Delachaise streets, from which his business still operates, might be labeled as its birthplace.

In the early days, Ortolano's grocery, with its one-of-a-kind machine, was a city-wide attraction. Today, the store and the stand have been replaced by a full-time snowball provisions business. To one side, Ortolano's wife, Josie, and their son, Anthony, oversee the sale of supplies including cups, spoons, straws, and syrups. Over in a connecting warehouse, George Ortolano, at 70, is still putting together the machines that have his name stamped on the side. The first Sno-Wizard had a wooden cabinet, but its successors are made of stainless steel. The machines get their wiz from a cutterhead which features a triple-headed beveled blade that scrapes the ice into a powder.

"There was no machine on the market that could do the job mine was doing," Ortolano boasts. "Mine could shoot the snow right into the cup. In 10 seconds it could fill a 16-ounce cup."

"Snowballs are more popular now. In fact, they were originally just a little knickknack item sold at sweet shops and so forth. But now," Ortolano observes, "people are specializing in snowballs. They are putting up nice buildings and fancy shops. People are putting money into the business and they're making money. Whereas, before I made the machine, people couldn't go to all that expense because the amount of snowballs they could make with one of the old obsolete machines wouldn't pay them to go into it. But with my machine, a person can push enough snowballs to make it a profitable business. The machines have revolutionized the snowball business. It made snowballs a business. It brought it to the front."

Although the Sno-Wizard is in itself an expensive investment, \$1,095 or \$1,120 with the drip pan, at least one veteran stand operator agrees to the importance of the machine and its inventor.

"Other ice machines would blast the ice. It wasn't a fine ice. Ortolano's machine uses the cutterhead and a motor and a pulley to finely shave the ice off of a block as it passes through and spends it into the cup. He, by far, has the finest machine on the market.

"Ortolano is a true craftsman," the snowball entrepreneur continues, "in the time that he spends on his machines and in the care that he tries to give. Like every artist, there are people who say that he's hard to deal with. That's maybe because he can't always service people right away. Because he wants to make sure that the blades on the machines are sharpened just so. If someone wants him to just slap a sharpening job on a machine, he's not going to do it. Each machine and each set of blades that he puts in, he's going to try to make as good as any other set. There will be no variation. That's how proud of his work he is."

Many of the tired, the hungry, and the thirsty in the City Park/Mid-City area know Carol Lodice as Pandora. Her stand, Pandora's Icebox, is renown for the exceptional fluffiness on the snow. She uses the standard SnoWizard machine, but adds her own technique. When asked to reveal her method, she whispers, "That's Pandora's secret." Part of the trick has to do with filling the cup with snow only to the rim. Next she fills a separate crown-shaped mold with the remainder of the snow and then sets the snow from the mold on top of the cup's rim. To the novice, the finished product looks like an ordinary snowball.

In fact, Pandora's secret has made the ice extraordinarily soft.

Lodice was the first in the city to sell smoothies—a blended drink made with fruit, crushed ice, and honey—along with snowballs. She talks about experimenting with honey as a substitute for sugar in some of the flavors.

Unlike many of the stand operators who are natives and who spend the summers of their youth chomping into chocolate flavored snowballs while resting under the golden raintree, Lodice is a convert to the faith. The Californian got her inspiration eight years ago when she witnessed her first pilgrimage to a snowball stand.

"When I first came to New Orleans," Lodice recalls, "somebody took me to get a snowball. I waited in the hot sun for 30 minutes for that snowball and I thought, 'Well, gee, this has got to be a great business if people are going to wait 30 minutes in the sun.'"

Soon, customers will be able to wait in the frost for a snowball. Lodice is planning to add sandwiches to her trade. By doing that, she hopes that her stand on North Carrollton and Dumaine will generate enough extra winter business to allow her to stay open and to sell snowballs year round.

She won't be alone.

Many miles up the road, close to where the bend in the river twists South Carrollton into St. Charles Avenue, Dan Sinclair's Snow Bank is ready for operation through all seasons. He's hoping that his own brand of snowball-stand-made chocolate chip cookies will help him through the cold months, but he'll keep his Sno-Wizard machine running too.

Faced with the need to attract more customers but limited by a facility that is only 80 square feet, Sinclair put aside thoughts of installing ice cream machines and blenders and opted instead for creating his own line of novelty flavors. "We took some of New Orleans' taste in its foods," Sinclair recalls, "and tried to incorporate it into a snowball; because everybody's got grape, strawberry, and the standard flavors. We made mocha, and cafe au lait, lemon meringue, and grasshopper. From there we added bananas Foster. We tried to copy bananas Foster onto a cup of ice. These are all syrups that we made from scratch. After bananas Foster we went to cherries jubilee, then Dreamsicle—we tried to copy the old Dreamsicles that we'd had when we were kids."

Concocting those flavors requires a bit of mixing and stirring plus a generous portion of imagination. Bananas Foster consists of banana oil, cream, and a touch of rum extract. "As you know," Sinclair explains, "when bananas Foster is made at a restaurant, they make a glaze, then they chop the bananas in it, then they serve it over ice cream. The cream we add sort of accounts for the ice cream." The cafe au lait flavor begins with actually brewing a pot of coffee and then adding in the sugar and cream.

Unique flavors are not new to snowball stands. Many stands through the years have had their own specialty flavors. Not far from the Snow Bank, the stand that has at different times been known as Williams' or Plum Street Snowball Stand and now under new management has been renamed Williams'-Plum Street, has had a reputation for its special Vanilla-Orchid Cream flavor. But nobody has added the dimension to his flavors as has Sinclair. At his new shop, Just Desserts, on stately St. Charles Avenue, the snowball has become high-brow.

Amidst ice cream parlor furniture and a store length counter with an overhanging stained glass canopy, the snowball is served in a manner befitting the dignity of the Avenue. In preparing a bananas Foster snowball, the snow is piled into a bowl. Syrup is doused all over while slices of banana are sprinkled around the sides. A glob of vanilla ice cream tops it off. It is a Foster not to be taken for granted.

Experiencing the dessert sets the mood for contemplating the reflections from the canopy: stained glass images of snowball carts.

Still, it's the everyday snowball dished into a Sweetheart cup and dripping with common syrups that gives the industry its flavor. Everyone agrees that the most popular syrup is still plain old strawberry. Lodice and Sinclair have both served up enough snowballs to where they are able to notice certain demographic tendencies. Blacks, for example, are especially fond of pineapple, especially strawberry and pineapple combinations. Sinclair notes that nectar is preferred almost exclusively among whites, although older whites tend to stick with the traditional strawberry, grape, and spearmint flavors. Banana is most popular among blacks. Chocolate has no boundaries—it is universally popular. Preferences, according to Sinclair, can even be determined by situation. Customers who have obviously just come from the tennis court want lemon-lime served to them. Whenever the weather suddenly turns warm after a cold spell, watermelon becomes a hot flavor. Even though the weather may be cooler, snowballs sell better in April—when people begin to think about summer—than they do in August—when thoughts turn to winter. "Right before Mardi Gras," Sinclair explains, "snowballs don't sell very well; two days after Mardi Gras, it's spring time. It can be 40 degrees outside and you will have people standing in line to get a snowball."

Girls buy more snowballs than do boys.

Regardless of when and to whom snowballs are sold, they are generally sold at a substantial profit margin. Estimates vary, but if a person owns his own stand and equipment and operates the business himself, the profit per snowball could be as high as 70 percent. Adding help and paying rent obviously

nibbles into the gains. An average profit margin per snowball is more likely to be around 50 percent.

Profit, of course, is determined by price and that is determined by the market. "We have a lot of rivals," Sinclair explains. "We rival ice cream stands; we rival soft drinks. A soft drink is now 35 cents. Since sugar is also a prime ingredient in soft drinks, we watch our costs rise relative to a soft drink."

Adding to the overhead are the various assessments and licensing requirements. Snowball stands pay occupational license fees to the city and the state based upon volume of business. The board of health may check periodically to make sure, among other things, that each stand is equipped with washing and toilet facilities.

In some suburban neighborhoods, snowball stands have become a delicate issue as they have stood close to possible zoning violations. The slapped together snowball shack on the edge of a residential area sometimes offends more than it dispenses tastes. Still, one particular suburban landmark owes its name to snow business. According to one story, Fat City was named after a snowball stand bearing that name that once stood in the area of the nightclub strip.

But snowballs, of course, like Mardi Gras, are properly a celebration of the city. Both enterprises may have spilled out to the fringes to meet neighborhood needs but they are a product of the character of New Orleans. If the truth be known, the purple, green, and gold that symbolize both the city and its carnival may actually represent grape, lime, and pineapple.